



Many Blooms:



An Anthology of Modern Women Poets

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Edited by Raymond Souland, Jr. & Cassandra Kramer

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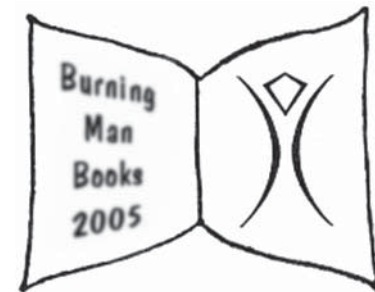
P O R T L A N D , O R E G O N



S C R I P T O R P R E S S

*Many Blooms:
An Anthology of
Modern Women Poets*

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& Cassandra Kramer



Number Thirty-eight

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Modern Women Poets**

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*This volume is for Judih Haggai,
a bloom as tuneful as the singers
within these pages . . .*



Cat in an Empty Apartment



Die—you can't do that to a cat.
 Since what can a cat do
 in an empty apartment?
 Climb the walls?
 Rub up against the furniture?
 Nothing seems different here,
 but nothing is the same.
 Nothing has been moved,
 but there's more space.
 And at nighttime no lamps are lit.

Footsteps on the staircase,
 but they're new ones.
 The hand that puts fish on the saucer
 has changed, too.

Something doesn't start
 at its usual time.
 Something doesn't happen
 as it should.
 Someone was always, always here,
 then suddenly disappeared
 and stubbornly stays disappeared.

Every closet has been examined.
 Every shelf has been explored.
 Excavations under the carpet turned up nothing.
 A commandment was even broken,
 papers scattered everywhere.
 What remains to be done.
 Just sleep and wait.
 Just wait till he turns up,
 just let him show his face.

Will he ever get a lesson
on what not to do to a cat.
Sidle toward him
as if unwilling
and ever so slow
on visibly offended paws,
and no leaps or squeals at least to start.

Still

In sealed box cars travel
names across the land,
and how far they will travel so,
and will they ever get out,
don't ask, I won't say, I don't know.

The name Nathan strikes fist against wall,
the name Isaac, demented, sings,
the name Sarah calls out for water for
the name Aaron that's dying of thirst.

Don't jump while it's moving, name David.
You're a name that dooms to defeat,
given to no one, and homeless,
too heavy to bear in this land.

Let your son have a Slavic name,
for here they count hairs on the head,
for here they tell good from evil
by names and by eyelids' shape.

Don't jump while it's moving. Your son will be Lech.
Don't jump while it's moving. Not time yet.
Don't jump. The night echoes like laughter
mocking clatter of wheels upon tracks.

A cloud made of people moved over the land,
a big cloud gives a small rain, one tear,
a small rain—one tear, a dry season.
Tracks lead off into black forest.

Cor-rect, cor-rect clicks the wheel. Gladeless forest.
Cor-rect, cor-rect. Through the forest a convoy of clamors.
Cor-rect, cor-rect. Awakened in the night I hear
cor-rect, cor-rect, crash of silence on silence.

My apologies to chance for calling it necessity.
My apologies to necessity if I'm mistaken, after all.
Please, don't be angry, happiness, that I take you as my due.
May my dead be patient with the way my memories fade.
My apologies to time for all the world I overlook each second.
My apologies to past loves for thinking that the latest is the first.
Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home.
Forgive me, open wounds, for pricking my finger.
I apologize for my record of minuets to those who cry from the depths.
I apologize to those who wait in railway stations for being asleep today at five a.m.
Pardon me, hounded hope, for laughing from time to time.
Pardon me, deserts, that I don't rush to you bearing a spoonful of water.
And you, falcon, unchanging year after year, always in the same cage,
your gaze always fixed on the same point in space,
forgive me, even if it turns out you were stuffed.
My apologies to the felled tree for the table's four legs.
My apologies to great questions for small answers.
Truth, please don't pay me much attention.
Dignity, please be magnanimous.
Bear with me, O mystery of existence, as I pluck the occasional thread from your train.
Soul, don't take offense that I've only got you now and then.
My apologies to everything that I can't be everywhere at once.
My apologies to everyone that I can't be each woman and each man.
I know I won't be justified as long as I live,
since I myself stand in my own way.
Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words,
then labor heavily so that they may seem light.



Elizabeth Bishop

In the Waiting Room

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.
My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited and read
the National Geographic
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
"Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.
And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain

—Aunt Consuelo's voice—
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I—we—were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world.
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
—I couldn't look any higher—
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How I didn't know any
word for it how "unlikely". . .
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled and barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.

They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

The Weed

I dreamed that dead, and meditating,
I lay upon a grave, or bed,
(at least, some cold and close-built bower).
In the cold heart, its final thought
stood frozen, drawn immense and clear,
stiff and idle as I was there;
and we remained unchanged together
for a year, a minute, an hour.
Suddenly there was a motion,
as startling, there, to every sense
as an explosion. Then it dropped
to insistent, cautious creeping
in the region of the heart,
prodding me from desperate sleep.
I raised my head. A slight young weed
had pushed up through the heart and its
green head was nodding on the breast.
(All this was in the dark.)
It grew an inch like a blade of grass;
next, one leaf shot out of its side
a twisting, waving flag, and then
two leaves moved like a semaphore.
The stem grew thick. The nervous roots
reached to each side; the graceful head
changed its position mysteriously,
since there was neither sun nor moon
to catch its young attention.
The rooted heart began to change
(not beat) and then it split apart
and from it broke a flood of water.
Two rivers glanced off from the sides,
one to the right, one to the left,
two rushing, half-clear streams,
(the ribs made of them two cascades)
which assuredly, smooth as glass,
went off through the fine black grains of earth.

The weed was almost swept away;
it struggled with its leaves,
lifting them fringed with heavy drops.
A few drops fell upon my face
and in my eyes, so I could see
(or, in that black place, thought I saw)
that each drop contained a light,
a small, illuminated scene;
the weed-deflected stream was made
itself of racing images.
(As if a river should carry all
the scenes that it had once reflected
shut in its waters, and not floating
on momentary surfaces.)
The weed stood in the severed heart.
“What are you doing there?” I asked.
It lifted its head all dripping wet
(with my own thoughts?)
and answered then: “I grow,” it said,
“but to divide your heart again.”

Jorie Graham



The Hiding Place

The last time I saw it was 1968.
Paris, France. The time of the *disturbances*.
We had claims. Schools shut down.
Three million *workers* and *students* on strike.

Marches, sit-ins, helicopters, gas.
They stopped you at gunpoint asking for papers.

I spent eleven nights sleeping in the halls. Arguments. *Negotiations*.
Hurrying in the dawn looking for a certain leader,
I found his face above an open street fire.
No, he said, tell them *no concessions*.
His voice was above the fire as if there were no fire—

language floating everywhere above the sleeping bodies;
and crates of fruit donated in secret;
and torn sheets (for tear gas) tossed down from shuttered windows;
and bread; and blankets, stolen from the firehouse.

The CRS (the government police) would swarm in around dawn
in small blue vans and round us up.
Once I watched the searchbeams play on some flames.
The flames push up into the corridor of light.

In the cell we were so crowded no one could sit or lean.
People peed on each other. I felt a girl
vomiting gently onto my back.
I found two Americans rounded up by chance,
their charter left that morning, they screamed, what were they going to
do?

Later a man in a uniform came in with a stick.
He started beating here and there, found the girl in her eighth month.
He beat her frantically over and over.
He pummelled her belly. Screaming aren't you ashamed?

I remember the cell vividly,
but is it from a photograph? I think the shadows as I
see them still—the slatted brilliant bits
against the wall—I think they're true—but are they from a photograph?
Do I see it from inside now—his hands, her face—or

is it from the news account?
The strangest part of getting out again was *streets*.
The light running down them.
Everything spilling whenever the wall breaks.
And the air—thick with dwellings—the air filled—doubled—
as if the open

had been made to render—
the open squeezed for space until the hollows spill out,
story upon story of them
starting to light up as I walked out.
How thick was the empty meant to be?
What were we finding in the air?

What were we meant to find?
I went home slowly sat in my rented room.
Sat for a long time the window open,

watched the white gauze curtain sluff this way then that a bit—
watched the air suck it out, push it back in. Lung
of the room with street cries in it. Watched until the lights
outside made it gold, pumping gently.
Was I meant to get up again? I was inside. The century clicked by.
The woman below called down *not to forget the*

loaf. Crackle of helicopters. Voice on a loudspeaker issuing
warnings. They made agreements, we all returned to work.
The government fell but then it was all right again.
The man above the fire, listening to my question,

the red wool shirt he wore: where is it? who has it?
He looked straight back into the century: no concessions.
I took the message back.
The look in his eyes—shoving out—into the open—
expressionless with thought:
no—tell them *no*—

Where are you from. I have never been there. Why did you leave. Excuse me. I cannot hear you. Because of the partition. Is there some way you could lower the partition. Where is your country. How many family did you leave behind. Behind—is that what you would call your country. Was it worth it. I can't imagine what you have seen. Your desert your mountains your endless blue rivers. *Blue rivers*. Your dirt cities. Your, your—oh what is it, I have seen it in pictures, or things like it. But *your* country. Your tiny piece of *country*. Do you regret. I always ask you this. You keep on changing there in the front seat driving me to my destination. The destination changes. But the movement is the same. You are making [not enough] money. Not enough. You are on the phone, or your country's radio is blasting. Over your new country your old country's radio. Or you are stoned. Or you are very angry. Scores fly through the small space between us. Someone *is* wrong. That is one firm truth. But you see I cannot do any right thing here any longer. I can think and out-think and so on. But we're at the gates of Judgment and you are still driving I am still the passenger. We could change places. You see of course it's only on this page we can do that. I will be the one who is sleeping when I as a passenger arrive at the stand and knock at the front window, or simply open the back door. *Wake up*. I will be the one abruptly awakened. I will be sorry to awaken you. I will say you didn't wake me I wasn't sleeping. I will say ok. You will say I was just thinking. I will say of what. We are now pulling away from the curb. I will say I was thinking of my country. I count out my money again. I use this word *enough*. We are approaching the destination. I am afraid. I am afraid I will not be able to handle your suffering. But that is a lie. You are so far away now from *your country*—you have had to give up something so great [God only knows what] [I don't know what] for money, I mean let's face it, for money to send home, yes, and then to get all the stuff—not very much it is true but they make you feel it is always almost *enough*. Also you are scared [therefore the flags on your windows] [one in the car itself].

Scared they will say you did IT. Or could have. I am also scared. Am I driving now? It is not clear here. There were supposed to be instructions. Stage directions. Or signs from the deities, but they have moved on. There must be an *other* place I think sometimes. For them to have moved on to. The Apocalypse? That is a common destination spot for many human minds now. The rapid swallowing of all we made. The bird's-eye view we're so in love with. Ah. Is this town empty? We keep on driving. You, you who have come here abandoning what you should not have abandoned (we both know this), what cordless thing thundering with gold were you imagining when you boarded
your bus
away

fast, lake in the distance? The heroic wanderings of your
own past people,
what have they come down to here, you glowingly immersed in cablight,
in the jagged sums you take home to make
ends meet. In the humming exchange rates for what you send home. Do you love them still? Here I see your eyes in the rear view. Ah. How many names can you name. Of people who are *true Americans*. The flags plastered on this vehicle block my view everywhere. How many will cover for you. How many
of your names
have you changed. Have you attended to
your outfit.

Do you sing it well, the god-sanctioned anthem. Are you fluent in *this* one-god's country. I know your country also has one god but read the fine print he is not the same as ours. "Ours." How does one peel this sticky nationhood off. The vehicle keeps moving I can only be its good passenger. You shut your eyes. You slumber and watch
the suburbs go
by. You tilt your glance to an aesthetic point of view. You shepherd
all the
interesting details. You "learn" how "others" live. Ah. End of the Republic. How your outskirts flow by on this way away from you. Your poor trapped immigrant driving your unimaginable sums around in his heart. Your balance sheet the road to him. His balance sheet enough to make you fear if you still fear. So long. Fearlessness of the American. How you are hated. Everywhere. So long.

The Way Things Work

is by admitting
or opening away.
This is the simplest form
of current: Blue
moving through blue;
blue through purple;
the objects of desire
opening upon themselves
without us; the objects of faith.
The way things work
is by solution,
resistance lessened or
increased and taken
advantage of.
The way things work
is that we finally believe
they are there,
common and able
to illustrate themselves.
Wheel, kinetic flow,
rising and falling water,
ingots, levers and keys,
I believe in you,
cylinder lock, pulley,
lifting tackle and
crane lift your small head—
I believe in you—
your head is the horizon to
my hand. I believe
forever in the hooks.
The way things work
is that eventually
something catches.

Adrienne Rich



Diving Into the Wreck

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
abroad the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it's a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to the scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

Integrity

the quality of being complete; unbroken condition; entirety
—Webster

A wild patience has taken me this far

as if I had to bring to shore
a boat with a spasmodic outboard motor
old sweaters, nets, spray-mottled books
tossed in the prow
some kind of sun burning my shoulder-blades.
Splashing the oarlocks. Burning through.
Your fore-arms can get scalded, licked with pain
in a sun blotted like unspoken anger
behind a casual mist.

The length of daylight
this far north, in this
forty-ninth year of my life
is critical.

The light is critical: of me, of this
long-dreamed, involuntary landing
on the arm of an inland sea.
The glitter of the shoal
depleting into shadow
I recognize: the stand of pines
violet-black really, green in the old postcard
but really I have nothing but myself
to go by; nothing
stands in the realm of pure necessity
except what my hands can hold.

Nothing but myself? . . . My selves.
After so long, this answer.
As if I had always known
I steer the boat in, simply.
The motor dying on the pebbles
cicadas taking up the hum
dropped in the silence.

Anger and tenderness: my selves.
And now I can believe they breathe in me
as angels, not polarities.
Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius
to spin and weave in the same action
from her own body, anywhere —
even from a broken web.

The cabin in the stand of pines
is still for sale. I know this. Know the print
of the last foot, the hand that slammed and locked the door,
then stopped to wreath the rain-smashed clematis
back on the trellis
for no one's sake except its own.
I know the chart nailed to the wallboards
the icy kettle squatting on the burner.
The hands that hammered in those nails
emptied that kettle one last time
are these two hands
and they have caught the baby leaping
from between trembling legs
and they have worked the vacuum aspirator
and stroked the sweated temples
and steered the boat there through this hot
misblotted sunlight, critical light
imperceptibly scalding
the skin these hands will also salve.

The Demon Lover

Fatigue, regrets. The lights
go out in the parking lot
two by two. Snow blindness
settles over the suburb.
Desire. Desire. The nebula
opens in space, unseen,
your heart utters its great beats
in solitude. A new
era is coming in.
Gauche as we are, it seems
we have to play our part.

A plaid dress, silk scarf,
and eyes that go on stinging.
Woman, stand off. The air
glistens like silk.
She's gone. In her place stands
a schoolgirl, morning light,
the half-grown bones
of innocence. Is she
your daughter or your muse,
this tree of blondness
grown up in a field of thorns?

Something piercing and marred.
Take note. Look back. When quick
the whole northeast went black
and prisoners howled and children
ran through the night with candles,
who stood off motionless
side by side while the moon swam up
over the drowned houses?
Who neither touched nor spoke?
whose nape, whose finger-ends
nervelessly lied the hours away?

A voice presses at me.
If I give in it won't
be like the girl the bull rode,
all Rubens flesh and happy moans.
But to be wrestled like a boy
With tongue, hips, knees, nerves, brain . . .
with language?
He doesn't know. He's watching
breasts under a striped blouse,
his bull's head down. The old
wine pours again through my veins.

Goodnight, then. 'Night. Again
we turn our backs and weary
weary we let down.
Things take us hard, no question.
*How do you make it, all the way
from here to morning?* I touch
you, made of such nerve
and flare and pride and swallowed tears.
Go home. Come to bed. The skies
look in at us, stern.
And this is an old story.

I dreamed about the war.
We were all sitting at table
in a kitchen in Chicago.
The radio had just screamed
that Illinois was the target.
No one felt like leaving,
we sat by the open window
and talked in the sunset.
I'll tell you that joke tomorrow,
you said with your saddest smile,
if I can remember.

The end is just a straw,
a feather furling slowly down,
floating to light by chance, a breath
on the long-loaded scales.
Posterity trembles like a leaf
and we go on making heirs and heirlooms.
The world, we have to make it,
my coexistent friend said, leaning
back in his cell.
Siberia vastly hulks
behind him, which he did not make.

Oh futile tenderness
of touch in a world like this!
how much longer, dear child,
do you think sex will matter?
There might have been a wedding
that never was:
two creatures sprung free
from castiron covenants.
Instead our hands and minds
erotically waver . . .
Lightness is unavailing.

Catalpas wave and spill
their dull strings across this murk of spring.
I ache, brilliantly.
Only where there is language is there world.
In the harp of my hair, compose me
a song. Death's in the air,
we all know that. Still, for an hour,
I'd like to be gay. How could a gay song go?
Why that's your secret, and it shall be mine.
We are our words, and black and bruised and blue.
Under our skins, we're laughing.

In triste veritas?
Take hold, sweet hands, come on . . .
Broken!
When you falter, all eludes.
This is a seasick way,
this almost/never touching, this
drawing-off, this to-and-fro.
Subtlety stalks in your eyes,
your tongue knows what it knows.
I want your secrets—I *will* have them out.
Seasick, I drop into the sea.

Marianne Moore



Nevertheless

you've seen a strawberry
that's had a struggle; yet
was, where the fragments met,

a hedgehog or a star-
fish for the multitude
of seeds. What better food

than apple seeds—the fruit
within the fruit—locked in
like counter-curved twin

hazelnuts? Frost that kills
the little rubber-plant—
leaves of *kok-sagyyz*-stalks, can't

harm the roots; they still grow
in frozen ground. Once where
there was a prickley-pear-

leaf clinging to a barbed wire,
a root shot down to grow
in earth two feet below;

as carrots from mandrakes
or a ram's-horn root some-
times. Victory won't come

to me unless I go
to it; a grape tendril
ties a knot in knots till

knotted thirty times,—so
the bound twig that's under-
gone and over-gone, can't stir.

The weak overcomes its
menace, the strong over-
comes itself. What is there

like fortitude! What sap
went through that little thread
to make the cherry red!

In the Public Garden

Boston has a festival—
compositely for all—
and nearby, cupolas of learning
(crimson, blue, and gold) that
have made education individual.

My first—an exceptional,
an almost scriptural—
taxi driver to Cambridge from Back Bay
said, as we went along, “They
make some find young men at Harvard.” I recall

the summer when Faneuil Hall
had its weathervane with gold ball
and grasshopper, gilded again by
a –leafer and –jack
till it glittered. Spring can be a miracle

there—a more than usual
bouquet of what is vernal—
“pear blossoms whiter than the clouds,” pin-
oak leaves that barely show
when other trees are making shade, besides small

fairy iris suitable
for Dulcinea del
Toboso; O yes, and snowdrops
in the snow, that smell like
violets. Despite secular bustle,

let me enter King’s Chapel
to hear them sing: “My work be praise while
others go and come. No more a stranger
or a guest but like a child
at home.” A chapel or a festival

means giving what is mutual,
even if irrational:
black sturgeon eggs—a camel
from Hamadan, Iran;
a jewel, or, what is more unusual,

silence—after a word-waterfall of the banal—
as unattainable
as freedom. And what is freedom for?
For “self-discipline,” as our
hardest-working citizen has said—a school;

it is for “freedom to toil”
with a feel for the tool.
Those in the trans-shipment camp must have
a skill. With hope of freedom hanging
by a thread—some gather medicinal

herbs which they can sell.
Ineligible if they ail.
Well?

There are those who will talk for an hour
without telling you why they have
come. And I? This is no madrigal—
no medieval gradual.
It is a grateful tale—
without that radiance which poets
are supposed to have—
unofficial, unprofessional. But still one need not fail

to wish poetry well
where intellect is habitual—
glad that the Muses have a home and swans—
that legend can be factual;
happy that Art, admired in general,
is always actually personal.

What Are Years?

What is our innocence,
what is our guilt? All are
naked, none is safe. And whence
is courage: the unanswered question,
the resolute doubt—
dumbly calling, deafly listening—that
is misfortune, even death,
encourages others
and in its defeat, stirs

the soul to be strong? He
sees deep and is glad, who
accedes to mortality
and in his imprisonment rises
upon himself as
the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
free and unable to be,
in its surrendering
finds its continuing.

So he who strongly feels,
behaves. The very bird,
grown taller as he sings, steels
his form straight up. Though he is captive,
his mighty singing
says, satisfaction is a lowly
thing, how pure a thing is joy.
This is mortality,
this is eternity.

Margaret Atwood



A Sad Child

You're sad because you're sad.
It's psychic. It's the age. It's chemical.
Go see a shrink or take a pill,
or hug your sadness like an eyeless doll
you need to sleep.

Well, all children are sad
but some get over it.
Count your blessings. Better than that,
buy a hat. Buy a coat or pet.
Take up dancing to forget.

Forget what?
Your sadness, your shadow,
whatever it was that was done to you
the day of the lawn party
when you came inside flushed with the sun,
your mouth sulky with sugar,
in your new dress with the ribbon
and the ice-cream smear,
and said to yourself in the bathroom,
I am not the favorite child.

My darling, when it comes
right down to it
and the light fails and the fog rolls in
and you're trapped in your overturned body
under a blanket or burning car,

and the red flame is seeping out of you
and igniting the tarmac beside your head
or else the floor, or else the pillow,
none of us is;
or else we all are.

Song of the Worms

We have been underground too long,
we have done our work,
we are many and one,
we remember when we were human

We have lived among roots and stones,
we have sung but no one has listened,
we come into the open air
at night only to love

which disgusts the soles of boots,
their leather strict religion.

We know what a boot looks like
when seen from underneath,
we know the philosophy of boots,
their metaphysic of kicks and ladders.
We are afraid of boots
but contemptuous of the foot that needs them.

Soon we will invade like weeds,
everywhere but slowly;
the captive plants will rebel
with us, fences will topple,
brick walls ripple and fall,

there will be no more boots.
Meanwhile we eat dirt
and sleep; we are waiting
under your feet.

When we say Attack
you will hear nothing
at first.

You Begin

You begin this way:
this is your hand,
this is your eye,
this is a fish, blue and flat
on the paper, almost
the shape of an eye
This is your mouth, this is an O
or a moon, whichever
you like. This is yellow.

Outside the window
is the rain, green
because it is summer, and beyond that
the trees and then the world,
which is round and has only
the colors of these nine crayons.

This is the world, which is fuller
and more difficult to learn than I have said.
You are right to smudge it that way
with the red and then
the orange: the world burns.

Once you have learned these words
you will learn that there are more
words than you can ever learn.
The word *hand* floats above your hand
like a small cloud over a lake.
The word *hand* anchors
your hand to this table
your hand is a warm stone
I hold between two words.

This is your hand, these are my hands, this is the world,
which is round but not flat and has more colors
than we can see.
It begins, it has an end,
this is what you will
come back to, this is your hand.